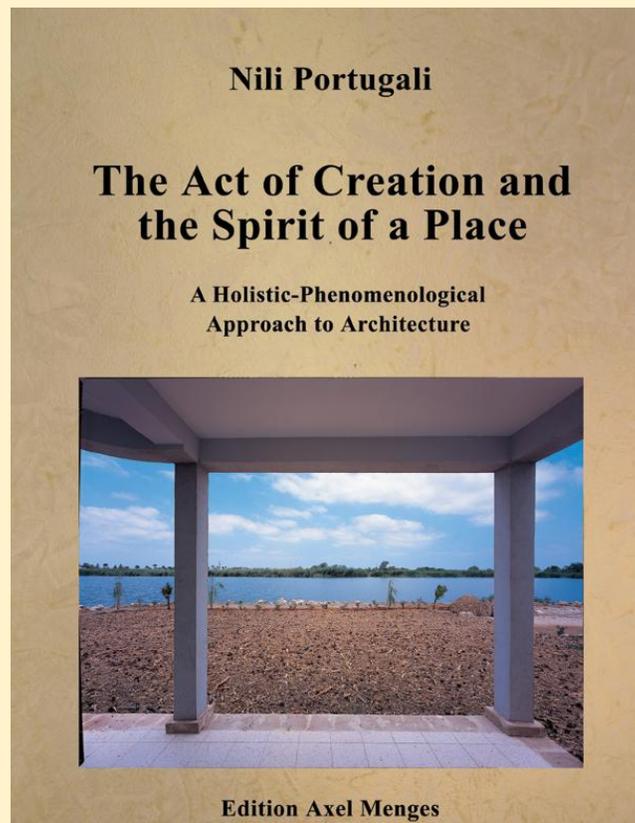


## **Building Places That Evoke Love and Emotional Wholeness:**

An essay on **The Act of Creation and the Spirit of a Place.** - A Holistic-Phenomenological Approach to Architecture, by Nili Porugali



**Jerry Katz**

Building Places That Evoke Love and Emotional Wholeness: An essay on The Act of Creation and the Spirit of a Place. - A Holistic- Phenomenological Approach to Architecture, by Nili Portugali.

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## Introduction

**Nili Portugali** is an Israeli architect, senior lecturer, researcher and published author. She specializes in public, residential, and commercial buildings, as well as interior design, landscape and urban design, all approached via a humanistic worldview.

Portugali is connected to the holistic - phenomenological - Buddhist school of thought. She made the film, *And the alley she whitewashed in light blue*. You can access information about her books, film, and other creative endeavours at <http://www.niliportugali.com/>.

This essay considers the main themes underlying organic architecture. The primary source is *The Act of Creation and the Spirit of a Place: A Holistic-Phenomenological Approach to Architecture*, by Nili Portugali.

To add dimension to the book, Nili's film, *And the alley she whitewashed in light blue*, is a recommended supplement. On the other hand, the book could be recommended as a supplement to the film. They are both powerful.

You may access Nili's book and film through <http://www.niliportugali.com/>.

*Part 1* reviews Nili Portugali's experiential realizations, her spiritual and mystical experience living in Safad, Israel, and its impact on her vision of how structures, neighbourhoods, and towns should feel.

*Part 2* looks at Nili's practical realizations and the influences of her primary teachers, Christopher Alexander and His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

In *Part 3*, the focus is the nature of pattern recognition and its relationship to emotional wholeness.

*Part 4* addresses organic architecture and planning an architectural work, including examples of pattern language and the nature of wholeness and beauty.

*Part 5* is a map of themes discussed.

*Addendum* presents Christopher Alexander's themes on the "I" and living structure as expressed in his book *The nature of order: An essay on the art of building and the nature of the universe. Book four: The luminous ground.*

## **Part 1. Experiential Realizations: Encounters with "The way things actually exist"**

*An experiential realization* guides one's worldview and values. A lifetime could be spent investigating its source and meaning.

*A practical realization* is an encounter with teachings that ground and expand the experiential realization.

### ***Two kinds of realizations***

Nili Portugali melds experiential and practical realizations to reveal an organic approach for practicing architecture.

By realization, I mean an encounter with truth, reality, or what His Holiness the Dalai Lama (a significant source of Portugali's Buddhist education) calls "The way things actually exist."

*An experiential realization* guides one's worldview and values. Many spend their life investigating its source and meaning.

*A practical realization* is an encounter with teachings that ground and expand the experiential realization.

### ***Safad: A city steeped in contemplation of the nature of reality***

Nili's experiential realization events are founded in Safad, Israel, whose origins date 516 BCE - 70 CE, the second temple period. The birthplace and home of seven generations of her family, Safad is imbued with a feeling of the presence of God.

For in the 16th century, thousands of Jews fled the Spanish Inquisition and settled into the delicious mountain air of Safad and its nearby forest. The new atmosphere was conducive to religious practice, Torah study, and communion with God, free of life-threatening distraction.

With the arrival of mystics and scholars -- especially Isaac ben Solomon Luria and Joseph Karo -- Kabala, the mystical teachings of Judaism, found a home in Safad.

Another prominent resident was Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, the purported author of the Zohar. This work is a part of Kabala yet perhaps even more mystical since it turns one's attention to their mystical roots.

Safad became the centre of Kabala in Eretz Israel. Alongside the most prominent scholars could have been thousands of their students and followers, each with their own interpretations, understandings, and personal experiences.

Thus Safad ripened to become a city steeped in religion, mysticism, meditation, contemplation, and a feeling for the presence of God everywhere, in every stone, sidewalk, wall, and kitchen.

All this steeping brewed a populace who felt and valued a deep sense of their true nature and reality.

### ***Building to evoke a feeling of ultimate truth***

Thus the streets, sidewalks, roads, and architecture were built by people raised and practiced in mystical, contemplative arts, prayer, and awareness of the presence of God.

Kabala, the Zohar, and writings of the 12-13th century Torah scholar Maimonides inspired colour, namely the blue and white houses, gates, and tombstones.

For Nili, living in Safad was the most significant influence on her "conception and vision of how a place should feel," she writes.

In Safad, Israel, the author discovered what its 16th-century mystics and their students and followers would have also known: "An ultimate truth common to us all as human beings," Nili asserts.

In Safad, Israel, the author discovered what its 16th-century mystics and their students and followers would have also known: "*An ultimate truth common to us all as human beings.*"

## **Part 2. Practical Realizations**

Nili Portugali fused the teachings and practices of architect and theorist *Christopher Alexander* with *Buddhist philosophy*.

### ***Searching for a way to touch the soul***

Nili Portugali intuited logic, facts, and practical truths behind creating places that open the heart, touch the soul and evoke timelessness. She especially noted those qualities in places of worship, regardless of religion or culture, and searched for ways to make structures and places exhibiting those potent attributes.

Nili's search led her to the University of California at Berkeley, where she studied and worked with Christopher Alexander at the centre for Environmental Structure in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Christopher Alexander was born in 1936 in Vienna, Austria. He received Harvard's first Ph.D. in architecture. In 1963, Alexander became Professor of Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley. He taught there for 38 years. Alexander has published hundreds of papers and built over 300 buildings globally. He currently lives and works in England, where he has been since 2002. For nearly 50 years, he has promoted an architectural hypothesis that values the "I" or essential self.

### ***Discovering the foundation of building the transcendent***

Fusing the teachings and practice of Christopher Alexander with Buddhist philosophy, Portugali's realization was two-fold:

1. Alexander's workable processes, namely pattern language along with principle of the timeless way of building, could give buildings spiritual, transcendent qualities.

2. Via Buddhist studies, especially the teachings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Portugali's recognized her felt experience of Safad as intimacy with the natural way things are. That is, as suchness itself rather than made-up mental constructs based on consumer culture, fashion, or statements of materiality.

### ***The fluidity between Buddhism and architecture***

Portugali quoted from His Holiness the Dalai Lama's book *The Joy of Living and Dying in Peace*:

“... things have a natural and innate mode of existence ... Reality is not something that the mind has fabricated anew. Therefore, when we search for the meaning of truth, we search for Reality, for the way things exist. This is called the logic of suchness, which means that we investigate things on the basis of their suchness or nature.”

As noted, this practical realization was two-fold. However, those two aspects were not separately standing alone. On the contrary, they were fused or non-separate. For Alexander, too, taught that there is "an ultimate common truth;" he called it the "I" or eternal self.

While one could grasp that truth through Alexander's work alone, its expression is more directly and fully expressed in Buddhist teachings.

Thus one's interest could fluidly move from Alexander's work to Buddhism and from Buddhism to Alexander's work. Likewise, since we are talking about "an ultimate common truth," teachings from other spiritual and religious traditions could be integrated into Alexander's work.

## ***The timeless way of building***

Nili Portugali identifies *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction* as Christopher Alexander's workable process. The foundation for that book is another volume by Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building*.

The timeless way of building connects to nature, the lay of the land, the trees and other foliage, the forces of the wind and sun. Those who live intimately with the timeless way all build the same way, whether they were alive thousands of years ago or today, regardless of culture, tradition, or global location.

The timeless way of building is aligned with the timeless way nature appears at any time or place and in its multitude of appearances. Nature doesn't follow fashion or trends, and neither does the timeless way of building.

Thus if a building is made organically out of immersion in the physical and cultural surroundings, then it would feel non-separate from its surroundings.

The effect is a feeling of harmony, wholeness, and sacredness experienced in, near, and around the building. The implication is that non-separation extends beyond any building to include interiors and landscapes as well as adjacent lands, neighbourhoods, villages, towns, and cities.

## ***Being aware of patterns***

Underlying the timeless way of building is a heightened awareness of the details or *patterns* of a planned building. A pattern is that detail to which you attend, ideally from the disposition of "ultimate common truth."

The science behind creating patterns is described and made workable in Christopher Alexander's, *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction*.

## ***A look at a mandala pattern could be helpful***

Nili writes about mandalas. The mandala is a pattern consisting of patterns, all harmoniously interacting. At the centre of the mandala is the primary point of focus. All patterns arise out of the centre while the centre depends upon the arising patterns for its existence. Other terms for the centre are familiar by now: "ultimate common truth," suchness, "the quality without a name." Further, the centre repeats and exists within every arising structure.



Those who live intimately with the timeless way *all build the same way*, whether they were alive thousands of years ago or today, regardless of culture, tradition, or global location.

### **Part 3. Patterns and emotional pleasantness**

Underneath the infinite variety of patterns is the evocation of a shared experience: emotional wholeness, overall pleasantness, joy, happiness. These qualities can infuse works of architecture.

#### ***Recognizing patterns of events, patterns of space***

I showed a mandala as an example of a pattern. Its centre represents that "quality without a name."

A mandala is an idealized vision of patterns. It's an excellent example of the two pattern qualities architects need to address:

*Patterns of events.* The elements making up the pattern are called events. For example, if someone is drawing a mandala and illustrating Om symbols in a circle around the centre, each Om symbol could be called an event. Whatever images they draw around the mandala's centre is an event.

*Patterns of space.* The second pattern quality is space. All mandalas are circular with a clearly defined centre. However, some creative drawings of mandalas may not be exactly circular. Appearances in nature, such as flowers and mushrooms, are not perfectly circular either, nor are their centers.

There is a potential infinity of pattern events and spaces, yet each can be recognized as such.

## ***Evoking happiness***

What is significant about recognizing patterns regardless of their composition is the potential for the evocation of a shared experience: emotional wholeness, overall pleasantness, joy, happiness.

This recognition of a common underlying emotional pleasantness can be carried into architecture. That's a primary finding of Christopher Alexander. What's more, the architect can achieve emotional pleasantness in a building by writing a pattern language.

### ***First, determine the patterns of space, then ...***

Portugali says that determining the patterns of space is the first step in planning. These patterns are determined by the nature and context of the project and the local culture.

Whether drawing a mandala or setting up a tent (as Andrew Macnab pointed to in a Facebook comment), the patterns of space are first considered. For the mandala, you draw the circle or rough circle first.

Setting up a tent, a pattern of space somehow reveals itself and you say or think, "This is a good place (space) to set up the tent."

### ***... then the events***

The pattern of events, Nili notes, is directly connected to the patterns of space. Thus, the events in a mandala follow the pattern of space.

The pattern of space where you set up the tent includes the tent itself as an event, and everything placed inside and outside the tent. Also included are the comings and goings of the campers and other hikers, squirrels and foxes, crows, leaves falling from trees, and so on.

The architect can achieve emotional wholeness in a building by writing a pattern language.

## Part 4. Organic architecture, pattern language, and beauty

Once recognized in a specific site, living reality and authentic feeling are manifest or revived in two ways: (1) via the writing of a pattern language and (2) by planning the physical structure on-site.

### ***The basis and inspiration of organic architecture***

Nili Portugali tells us that the basis for the plan of a building consists of a balance between the written pattern language and "The *living reality of the actual site*, a reality that *differs* from site to site" (Portugali's italics).

The living reality, experienced as an intimate and impersonal authentic feeling, inspires organic architecture.

Recall these earlier quotes that describe living reality and authentic feeling:

What His Holiness the Dalai Lama calls, "The way things actually exist."

What Portugali describes as, "Conception and vision of how a place should feel" ... "An ultimate truth common to us all as human beings."

### ***Reviving living reality***

Living reality and authentic feeling are manifest or revived in two ways: (1) via the writing of a pattern language, and (2) by planning the physical structure on-site rather than in an office, the latter being the widely accepted model of architectural planning.

In the book *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction*, a living reality is given other terms such as a living centre, a living structure, a living world.

Alexander takes a first-principles approach and speaks more about *living centres* than the living world, living reality, or even living structure.

### ***What is a living centre?***

Returning to the mandala example, living centres within a mandala would include every element of each event. Recall that the drawing of OM symbols around the centre of a mandala was the creation of events. Each of the five components of an OM symbol, the four curves and the dot at the top, is a living centre:



Each living centre is a living structure, a living world, a living reality. This holistic view focuses on attention to living centres and is essential to organic architecture and writing a pattern language.

## ***A poetic example of pattern language***

The architect may create living centres by writing a pattern language for a structure.

Alexander wrote, "A pattern language is a created thing. It is a work of poetry, a work of art. It is potentially as profound in its way as a building can be."

Thus, the architect must be clear about the centres that will confer profound *life*. Only then may the unfolding of the plan or the design occur.

Here is an example from one of the written patterns for Alexander's design of the Eishin campus located outside Tokyo and currently serving as a high school. The original pattern language for Eishin consists of some 200 centres or patterns:

The interior character is warm and subdued: wooden columns, floors and walls in places; pale yellow wall color, comparable to golden chrysanthemums, paper or silk; near-white sliding screens and ceilings.

Floors of many buildings are raised, slightly more than usual, off the ground.

Classrooms have polished wooden floors, or carpets, and shoes are not worn inside the classrooms.

All homebase classrooms have big windows facing south.

Many rooms have gallery spaces to one side, where light comes in beyond, and shines through screens.

Many walls and other surfaces are wooden, with natural unfinished wood.

The classrooms and other rooms are furnished with very solid wooden desks, which several students share. (Alexander, 2002, p. 364)

### ***The necessity of a spiritually awakened architect***

Alexander revealed,

The pattern language, then, is that aspect of the world which steers buildings towards the creation of a living state. . . . We have to work, with a constant intuition about the life, at what is going to intensify this life. This can only be done in a spiritual state of mind. The extent to which I am able to do this depends on the extent of my own mental and emotional awakening.

Further, he claimed that one must “ask which kinds of centres will do the most to produce real spiritual life in people: which things, events, moments, kinds of centres, will create a spiritual awakening in a person or a person’s life.”

Alexander gave a down-to-earth description of what it's like to work from the disposition of spiritual awakening or what he has called the "I" or “eternal life”:

I am in the state of trying to see ... what will most concretely reveal the most translucent inner being in a person. When I eat, eat. When I walk, walk. I am trying to find those aspects of sight, sound, smell, the sandwich eaten on the back of the truck, the sun’s rays on the bedroom floor, which will illuminate existence and make a person come in touch with his eternal life.

## ***"The secret enfolded in the beauty of a building"***

The intent is to create something both beautiful and functional at the same time. Portugali writes, "The secret enfolded in the beauty of a building (or of any artifact) as a whole lies in its spatial order and in the nature of its details."

Spatial order is made of patterns of space and events, its details expressed in pattern language written from the sense of the "I" or eternal self.

The beauty of the completed structure and its details share esthetic values seen in Shaker furniture and utensils about which Nili writes, "The wholeness and beauty of form are products of pure functionalism ... there is no room for beautiful forms that do not flow from a functional need."

## ***Beauty is timeless***

The point of organic architecture is to build something holistic, beautiful in every order of its existence, from the curvature of the cabinet knob to the placement of the building in space.

Writing a pattern language guides the architect on an organic journey toward the achievement of a holistic work.

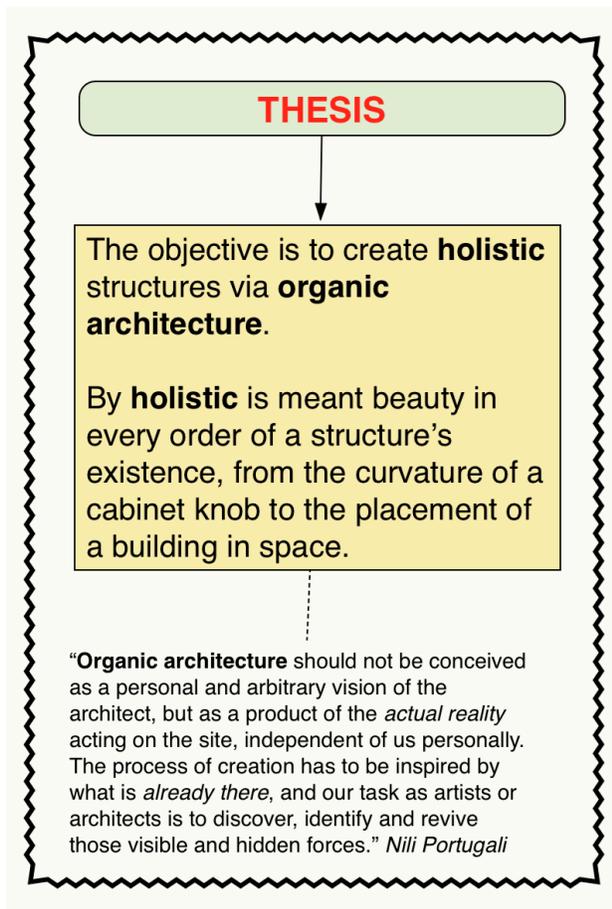
Yet perhaps even prior to being an architect, there must exist the desire to understand and achieve of timeless beauty.

Timeless beauty must be known as a feel, a profound realization, and recognized as what Nili says is "An ultimate truth common to us all as human beings."

Nili Portugali brings to whoever comes upon it, "The secret enfolded in the beauty of a building," the secret of Safad.

The point of organic architecture is to build something holistic, beautiful in every order of its existence, from the curvature of the cabinet knob to the placement of the building in space.

## Part 5. Mapping themes and ideas



## REALIZATIONS

via Safad, Israel

For Nili, living in Safad was the most significant influence on her "conception and vision of **how a place should feel**," she writes.

In Safad, Israel, the author discovered what its 16th-century mystics and their students and followers would have also known: "**An ultimate truth** common to us all as human beings," Nili asserts.

via Christopher Alexander

**Felt qualities of emotional wholeness**, overall pleasantness, joy, happiness. can infuse architectural works, thus evoking a shared experience.

Alexander's workable processes, namely **pattern language** along with principles of The Timeless Way of Building could give buildings spiritual, transcendent qualities.

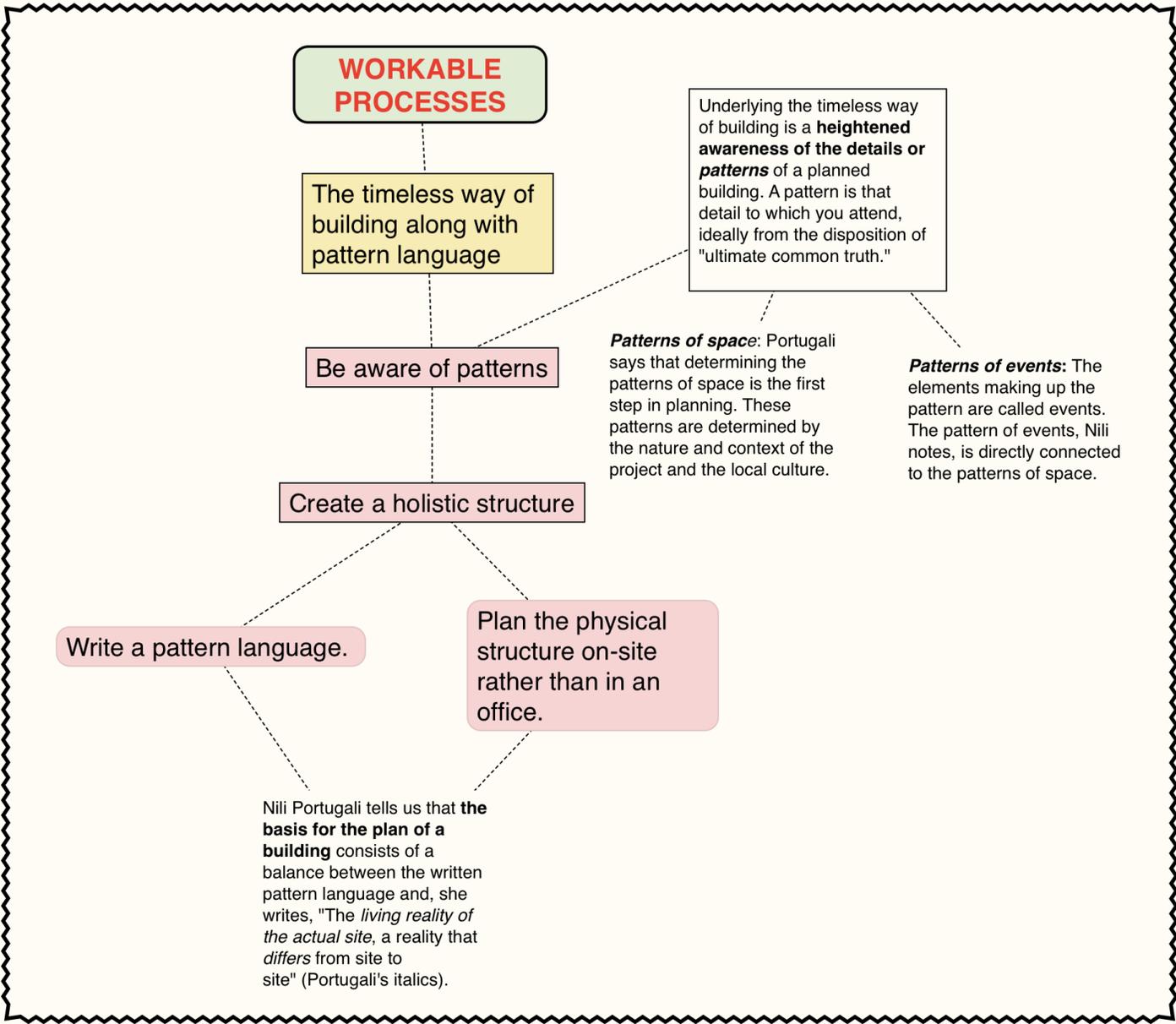
The **timeless way of building** is aligned with the timeless way nature appears at any time or place and in its multitude of appearances.

"A timeless quality exists in buildings rooted in different cultures and traditions; the experience they generate is common to all people, no matter where or from what culture they come from. .... Thus Alexander's basic assumption was that behind this quality, which he calls '**the quality without a name**', lies a universal and eternal element common to us all as human beings." *Nili Portugali*

Those who live intimately with the timeless way *all build the same way*, whether they were alive thousands of years ago or today, regardless of culture, tradition, or global location.

via Buddhism:  
H.H. The Dalai Lama

"We investigate things on the basis of their suchness or nature." *HH The Dalai Lama*



## HOLISTIC INTENT

### BEAUTY

Portugali writes, "**The secret enfolded in the beauty of a building** (or of any artifact) as a whole lies in its spatial order and in the nature of its details."

### FUNCTION

Nili writes, "**The wholeness and beauty of form are products of pure functionalism** ... there is no room for beautiful forms that do not flow from a functional need."

### TIMELESSNESS

**Timeless beauty must be known as a feel, a profound realization**, and recognized as what Nili says is "An ultimate truth common to us all as human beings."

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## Biographies

**Nili Portugali** is an Israeli architect, senior lecturer, researcher and published author. She specializes in public, residential, and commercial buildings, as well as interior design, landscape and urban design, all approached via a humanistic worldview. Portugali is connected to the holistic - phenomenological - Buddhist school of thought. She made the film, *And the alley she whitewashed in light blue*. Access her books, film and other creative endeavours at <http://www.niliportugali.com/>

**Christopher Alexander** was born in 1936 in Vienna, Austria. He received Harvard's first Ph.D. in architecture. In 1963, Alexander became Professor of Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley. He taught there for 38 years. Alexander has published hundreds of papers and built over 300 buildings globally.

Christopher Alexander currently lives and works in England, where he has been since 2002. For nearly 50 years, he has promoted an architectural hypothesis that values the "I" or essential self.

Alexander's groundbreaking works include *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction*, *The Timeless Way of Building*, and the four-volume book set, *The Nature of Order: An Essay on the Art of Building and the Nature of the Universe*.

**Jerry Katz** moderates and contributes to Nonduality Salon, an online discussion forum that has been active since 1998. To join, please visit <https://www.facebook.com/groups/nondualitysalon>. Jerry's website is <https://www.nonduality.com>.

## **Addendum**

### **The "I," Living Structure, and Christopher Alexander**

**by Jerry Katz**

Architect Christopher Alexander persistently and passionately speaks about the need to experience the "I" or eternal self and create living structures that inspire the feeling of "I" in others.

#### **The "I"**

Christopher Alexander's work is characterized by persistently and passionately speaking about the need to experience in one's self what he calls the "I."

The "I" is Alexander's most common word for a person's essential being or true nature, although he has used other terms:

"eternal self" (Alexander, 2004, p. 40),

"ground of all things" (Alexander, 2004, p. 47),

"Self" (Alexander, 2004),

"substrate of the universe . . . the origin of who and what we are" (Alexander, 2016),

"true childish heart" (Alexander, 2004, p. 5),

and "true self" (Alexander, 2004, p. 52).

## Biography

"I was able to see how buildings support human -well-being — not so much mechanical or material well--being, but rather the emotional well-being that makes a person feel comfortable in himself." -C.A.

Christopher Alexander was born in 1936 in Vienna, Austria. He received Harvard's first Ph.D. in architecture. In 1963, Alexander became Professor of Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley. He taught there for 38 years. Alexander has published hundreds of papers and built over 300 buildings globally (Christopher Alexander, 2011).

Christopher Alexander currently lives and works in England, where he has been since 2002. For nearly 50 years, he has promoted an architectural hypothesis that values the "I" or essential self.

Alexander's groundbreaking works including *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction* (Oxford University Press, 1977), *The Timeless Way of Building* (OUP, 1977), and the four-volume book set, *The Nature of Order: An Essay on the Art of Building and the Nature of the Universe* (centre for Environmental Structure, 2004), from which Volume Four is the source for most of the material in this essay (Christopher Alexander, 2011).

When Christopher Alexander began to study for his Ph.D. in architecture in 1958 at Harvard, he was seeking "the smallest particles of *fact* that I could be certain of ... small enough and solid enough that I could be sure that they were true" (Alexander, 2016).

In this search, he realized that some of the small details of architecture touched people in beneficial ways. They had the potential to inspire and support mental and

emotional well-being:

“. . . a shelf beside the door where one could put a packet down while searching for one’s keys, for instance, or the possibility of a sunbeam coming into a room and falling on the floor” (Alexander, 2016).

Christopher Alexander began his journey recognizing the smallest particle of architectural fact. What followed was recognition of its equivalent in a person: The "I."

He elaborates:

"I was able to see how buildings support human -well-being — not so much mechanical or material well--being, but rather the emotional well-being that makes a person feel comfortable in himself. And as I studied these small effects carefully, gradually I was led to a conception of the wholeness and wellness that might, under ideal circumstances, arise between buildings and human beings" (Alexander, 2016).

Thus began an inquiry into the fundamental nature of architectural elements.

He ultimately recognized his true self, the “I,” or “true childish heart” (Alexander, 2004, p. 5). He wrote that the "I,"

"is something vast, existing outside myself and inside myself, as if it were a contact with the eternal, something everlasting existing before me, in me, around me. I recognized, too, that my most lucid moments occur when I am swept up in this void, and fully conscious of it, as if it were a blinding light" (Alexander, 2004, p. 7).

From this seed of self-realization, Alexander’s architectural theories began to emerge. Their hallmark was the deep feeling of being human (Alexander, 2016).

Now, for over sixty years, Alexander has worked “to provide a basis for architecture that can sustain human feeling and the human spirit” (Alexander, 2016).

Christopher Alexander began his journey recognizing the smallest particle of architectural fact (Alexander, 2016). What followed was recognition of its equivalent in a person: The "I."

Integral to this journey is the "intimate relatedness" between the “I” of an individual and the “I” recognized in architectural components (Alexander, 2016).

"Gradually, I was led to a conception of the wholeness and wellness that might, under ideal circumstances, arise between buildings and human beings." -C.A.

## Two Propositions

"All value depends on a structure in which the life of each centre, in some degree, is a connection to the 'I' and awakens the 'I' in us." -C.A.

These ideas appear in *The Nature of Order: An Essay on the Art of Building and the Nature of the Universe. Book Four: The Luminous Ground* (Alexander, 2004).

The first theme, already well-visited, is that of the "I":

"The making of a living world cannot be separated from each person's search for the true self [or the 'I']" (Alexander, 2004, p. 97).

The second is the theme of living centres and living structures:

"All value depends on a structure in which the life of each centre, in some degree, is a connection to the 'I' and awakens the 'I' in us" (Alexander, 2004, pp. 3-4).

## Living centres, Living Structures

"I remain continuously *and exclusively* occupied with the problem of creating living structure. . . . There is only the desire to create living structure and to create it well. . . . I have become convinced that we cannot successfully create living structure in full degree without paying attention to the ground of all things [the 'I']" (Alexander, 2004, p. 47).

Alexander described the essence of a living centre:

What I call the eternal self [or "I"] is a part of the human being which exists already, and is available to us. It is something which appears in you and me, every day, and is there for the asking. This self, or "I," is the core of every living centre. (Alexander, 2004, p. 40).

Creating a living structure is not separate from experiencing the "I":

"I ask myself constantly — and it is the only question I really ask of myself — What must I do to put this self-like quality into the house, the room, the roof, the path, the tile? It is 'I,' the I-myself, lying within all things. It is that shining something which draws me on, which I feel in the bones of the world, which comes out of the earth and makes our existence luminous" (Alexander, 2004, pp. 2-3).

"What must I do to put the 'I' into the house, the room, the roof, the path, the tile?" -C.A.

## Experiencing the “I”

“Turn within. 'I am' you know. Be with it all the time you can spare, until you revert to it spontaneously. There is no simpler and easier way.” - *Nisargadatta Maharaj*

Christopher Alexander frequently reminds his readers to experience the “I”: “The making of a living world cannot be separated from each person’s search for the true self [or the ‘I’]” (Alexander, 2004, p. 97).

### **An intellectual understanding of the "I"**

If one isn't investigating the experience of the “I,” an intellectual understanding is sufficient.

Ramana Maharshi lived from 1879 to 1950. He was one of the most influential and significant sages and spiritual teachers from India. When asked whether an intellectual understanding of the Truth is necessary, Ramana responded, using the terms God, Self, and Truth for “I”:

Yes. Otherwise why does not the person realise God or the Self at once, i.e., as soon as he is told that God is all or the Self is all? That shows some wavering on his part. He must argue with himself and gradually convince himself of the Truth before his faith becomes firm (Ramana Maharshi, 1989, p. 550).

## "Turn within": The experience of the "I"

Those who desire the experience of the "I" may benefit from a formal practice of Zen, Taoism, Christian mysticism, Vedanta, or any one of several other traditions.

The teachings of individual sages and teachers, some of them loosely affiliated with established traditions, may also be accessed.

For example, **Ramana Maharshi** recommended self-enquiry, the questioning of what one's true nature is. I can't address here the many questions associated with self-enquiry practice. However, I recommend this site:

<https://archive.arunachala.org/docs//self-enquiry/>

Ramana said,

“I exist” is the only permanent self-evident experience of everyone. Nothing else is so self-evident as “I am.” What people call self-evident, that is, the experience they get through the senses, is far from self-evident. The Self alone is that. So to do self-enquiry and be that “I am” is the only thing to do. “I am” is reality. I am this or that is unreal. “I am” is truth, another name for Self. (Godman, 1985, p. 45)

**Nisargadatta Maharaj** is a widely respected late-20th-century Hindu Guru who lived in India from 1897 to 1981. Nisargadatta often spoke about the nature of the “I am,” which may be considered another term for the “I.”

Nisargadatta said, “Turn within. 'I am' you know. Be with it all the time you can spare, until you revert to it spontaneously. There is no simpler and easier way.” (Nisargadatta Maharaj, 1993, p. 13)

In the words of both Ramana and Nisargadatta are heard Alexander's claim that the “I” “is a part of the human being which exists already, and is available to us” (Alexander, 2004, p. 40).

Nisargadatta advises paying attention to the “I” or “I am” as often as you can in the midst of your day.

Ramana invites the seeing that one’s reality or true nature is “I am” or the “I.”

**Rupert Spira** resides in the United Kingdom and travels worldwide to teach. He asks questions: “Are you aware now?” “Direct your attention to the experience of being aware. . . . Where does your attention go?” (Spira, 2015).

Like Ramana and Nisargadatta, Spira echoes Alexander’s statement that the “I” “is there for the taking” (Alexander, 2004, p. 40).

The bottom line is to attend to the “I.”

In the words of Ramana and Nisargadatta are heard Christopher Alexander’s claim that “the ‘I’ is a part of the human being which exists already, and is available to us.”

## Awakening the “I” Via an Experience with Structure: Chartres Cathedral

An example of a structure made of living centres is Chartres cathedral (Alexander, 2004) (see Figure 1). Christopher Alexander’s writing about Chartres is so passionate that one can almost feel the “I” awakening. If that is the case, then the experience of being within Chartres itself, one might imagine, could awaken the “I” or inspire the realization of the true self.



*Figure 1.* North rose window, detail of centre. Chartres, France. Mossot (n.d.).

The following is an example of Alexander's writing about the living centers of Chartres:

I experience each of these centres as something nearly sentient. I experience the feeling in the thing, not only in me, as I look at this being, contemplate it, meet it, confront it. Thus, literally, as I look at the cathedral which is made of a hundred million beings I see and feel life in everything. That is the measure of its unity and greatness as a whole (Alexander, 2004, p. 94).

Each being — that is, each centre — gets its life from the existence of the other centres around it within the unity they form together. But the interwoven lives of these beings, all essentially stemming from the same I-like character, is then like a proliferation, an elaboration of the I. It is all "I." It is all manifestation, elaboration, intensification of the same. The structure which contains ten thousand beings is not ten thousand separate entities. It is one entity, only shouting the same name, one sound, one voice, one I, one unity (Alexander, 2004, p. 94).

## Conclusion

"All value depends on a structure in which the life of each centre, in some degree, is a connection to the 'I' and awakens the 'I' in us. The making of a living world cannot be separated from each person's search for the true self." -C.A.

A worldview that values awakening experience and leads to self-inquiry and knowledge of the "I," may give rise to buildings possessing "living centres" and "living structure." Living structures may, in turn, inspire an awakening experience in another and their pursuit of the experience of the "I."

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